

RABINDRANATH TAGORE, HIS FICTION, AND HIS FEMINISM: SOME EXAMPLES

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The fictional works by Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) (including his dance-dramas or 'nrityanatyas') usually cover a wide range of topics: especially love, devotion, social discrimination, anti-imperial struggle, and facets of human relationships. However, many of the 21st-century publications critically focusing on Tagore's oeuvre – for example, the James Sterba-edited *Controversies in Feminism* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001), the P.C. Hogan and Lalita Pandit-edited *Rabindranath Tagore: Universality and Tradition* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2003), the Ranjana Harish and V. B. Harishankar-edited *Shakti: Multidisciplinary Perspectives on Women's Empowerment in India* (New Delhi: Rawat Publications, 2004), R. K. Dhawan's *Feminism and Recent Indian Literature – Vol. 1* (New Delhi: Prestige Books, 2008), the Malashri Lal-edited *Tagore and the Feminine: A Journey in Translations* (New Delhi: Sage, 2015), the Chandrava Chakraborty and Sneha Kar Chaudhury-edited *Tagore's Idea of New Woman* (New Delhi: Sage, 2017) – are increasingly bringing in the feminist perspectives. This is quite natural and understandable – especially when it is an incontrovertible fact that a sizeable-number of Tagore's fictional publications (short-stories and novels) like *Athithi* ('The Guest', 1895), *Chokher Bali* ('A Grain of Sand'; 1901), *Streer Patra* ('The Wife's Letter', 1914), and *Aparichita* ('The Unknown Woman', 1916), and the three critically-lauded *nrityanatyas* – *Chitrangada* (1936), *Chandalika* (1938), and *Shyama* (1939) have very powerful, strong, and resilient female characters who reveal themselves through their individualism.

What the present paper proposes to do is to: first, historically analyse Tagore's conception of gender and gender-empowerment; and, second, re-read how ten of the more well-known Tagorean females – *Mriganayanee* (*Kankal*, 1892), *Mrinmoyee* (*Samapti*, 1893), *Giribala* (*Manbhanjan*, 1895), *Charulata* (*Nastoneer*, 1901), *Binodini* (*Chokher Bali*), *Mrinal* (*Strir Patra*), *Kalyani* (*Aparichita*, 1916), *Chitrangada* (*Chitrangada*), *Chandalika* (*Chandalika*), and *Shyama* (*Shyama*) assert their femininity and 'independence' within the short fictional spaces through either strong beliefs and individualism or radical thinking and practices.

Rabindranath Tagore was born in an aristocratic family (with roots in Jessore and Burdwan). His family-members were Brahmo Hindus, with strong views in favour of the equality and socio-cultural liberation of women (Gupta 96). Influenced by the teachings of the Upanishads, the Brahmos believed in the supreme feminine powers, and understandably Tagore's maturing mind was deeply influenced by what he learned of the feminine. Moreover, he was under the direct influence of some strong-willed female family-members who were to later leave indelible marks on the cultural history of the whole of Bengal (Ray 7) (Mukherjee 28). The first was his mother, Sarada Tagore (1830-75), who was the mother of fifteen children by her husband Debendranath Tagore (1817-1905) and yet found time to learn and discuss. Krishna Kripalani writes,

“[...] [T]he hunger for a mother's [that is, Sarada Tagore's] affection, never appeased in childhood, was to survive in the son as a recurring longing for feminine affection and care. Its haunting echoes can be heard in the exquisite child-poems Rabindranath Tagore wrote in the peak of his manhood, some of which were later published in English translation as *The Crescent Moon*. In some of his short stories and novels the mother's love has been delineated with such wealth of tenderness as to make one wonder whether the author was not partially satisfying his own unappeased hunger” (28).

By the time Tagore had lost his mother and was moulding into a sensitive writer, his family had become deeply involved in the 'proceedings' and 'activities' of the Bengal Renaissance. Two of the more important features of this (19th -century to early-20th-century) 'movement' was the effort by the male 'members' to get their female counterparts and acquaintances to write and publish, and the publication of journals and magazines in which were printed several critically-acclaimed female essays and articles (Classe 133). Rabindranath Tagore encouraged the females to write, and even sponsored them. His elder sister, Swarnakumari Ghosal (1855-1932), became one of the prominent female novelists of Bengal, and participated in the anti-imperial activities of the Indian National Congress. Rabindranath was directly connected to the Sakhi Samiti, which was founded by his influential didi in 1896 (Kumar 42), and this also contributed to moulding of his different ideas regarding femininity.

In Kadambari Tagore (1858-84), the wife of his elder-brother Jyotirindranath Tagore (1849-1925), Rabindranath found an ideal companion and critic. Rabindranath arranged for the education of

Kadambari, and thereafter always showed drafts of his compositions to her for comments and suggestions. Kadambari gave insightful reviews, and is known to have inspired Rabindranath to write many of his poems and short-stories.

In 1883, Rabindranath Tagore was married to Bhabatarini Roy Choudhury (c. 1872-1902). Rabindranath's re-naming of his wife as 'Mrinalini' is supposed to have something to do with his naming Annapurna Turkhadekar (1858-91, the second daughter of the physician-social-reformer Atmaram Turkhadekar, 1823-98, who was Rabindranath's 1878-79 love interest) as 'Nalini'¹. Annapurna Turkhadekar was senior to Rabindranath by three years, and yet her visits to England, her ease with English, and her vivacious and direct-speaking-nature attracted Rabindranath to her. In November 1880, Turkhadekar married Harold Littledale (b. 1853), a Scottish college-lecturer in History, and migrated to Edinburgh, but Rabindranath fondly remembered her in his writings. Mrinalini Devi, who studied English at Loreto House, was well-conversant with English and Sanskrit literatures, and translated parts of The Mahabharata and the Upanishads. She acted in her husband's plays, and when Rabindranath established the brahmacharya-school at Santiniketan in 1902, she sold most of her jewellery for the funding. The other women of artistic and epistemic excellence who directly influenced Rabindranath's writings included the Argentine writer Victoria Ocampo (1890-1979) (whom Tagore re-named as 'Bijoya'); Preeti Adhikary (Lady Ranu Mukherjee) (1906-2000), a patron of arts; the Spanish-born poet Zenobia Camprubi Aymar (1887-1956), and Pratima Chattopadhyay (1893-1969), a painter and the wife of Rabindranath's son Rathindranath Tagore (1888-1961). Tagore's three daughters – Madhurilata (1886-1918), Renuka (1890-1904), and Mira (1892-1962) – also shaped his thoughts and approach to women. Other than the feminine influence, Tagore also thought of initiating females to dance, and defied societal bindings to initiate the female students in dancing at his Santiniketan ashrama under the guise of 'sangeetik bayam'. It is, therefore, natural that his oeuvre would be replete with strong female characters.

There are some controversies regarding Tagore's professed feminism too. Quoting Sati Chatterjee, an article in *The Telegraph* (Kolkata, 20 March 2014) publishes:

“In April 1933, [...] [Rabindranath Tagore] had written to Ramananda Chattopadhyay how the social structure in the West had been disturbed by women going out of home and becoming economically independent. ‘He was for the division of labour — man going out and

earning, and women spending judiciously while looking after the affairs at home'. In another letter in 1910 to Labanyalekha Chakraborty, he talks of his hopes that his new daughter-in-law Pratima, a remarried widow, would administer a loving, healing touch to the family, that she would be "above all but beneath everybody" and he would see "a benign motherhood" in her. He was alive to the brutal injustice and inequities in the system. The stories in *Galpaguchchha* (1900) revolve around women in vulnerable social positions"².

Nevertheless, to reiterate, I have identified ten female characters from Tagore's novels, short-stories, and dance-dramas, who have been given high places in the gamut of Bengali literary criticism for their assertion – directly or indirectly – of strong femininity. They are: Mrigonoyonee (Kankal), Mrinmoyee (Samapti), Giribala (Manbhanjan), Charulata (Nastoneer), Binodini (Chokher Bali), Mrinal (Streer Patra), Kalyani (Aparichita), Chitrangada (Chitrangada), Chandalika (Chandalika), and Shyama (Shyama).

In 1892, Tagore published the ghost-story "Kankal" ("Skeleton"), with a strong – though narcissist – female-character, Mrigonoyonee. William Radice might have noticed the presence of 'humour' and 'irony' in such supernatural stories³, but I personally feel that stories like "Kankal" deals with the extent to which a self-satisfying, strong-willed woman can go. In the story, Mrigonoyonee narrates the story of her death to a stranger – how she, as a widow, lived for some time with her brother, and thereafter, how she killed herself and a physician (with whom she had fallen in love) to prevent him from marrying someone else. I think that Tagore also wants to explore, in this short-story, how sorrowfully widows of his times lived under numerous societal restrictions. He probably wants to indicate the strength of will a woman would need to break the shackles. The 'skeleton' Tagore talks about might be the skeleton of the female-abusing patriarchal society of his times, and he develops his female protagonists as individualistic and charming enough to challenge different chauvinistic 'shackles'. It is a pity that Mrigonoyonee has to kill herself to satisfy her love.

Second on my list – and chronologically arranged – is Mrinmoyee of "Samapti", a short-story published in 1893. In Tagore's narrative, Mrinmoyee is a flamboyant young woman who, once again, is bound by patriarchal restrictions. When she is married off to an educated gentleman (Apurbo), she does not reciprocate her husband's appreciation or love or his desires. She is resentful of her rather-forced marriage, but Mrinmoyee (the 'soil-made' – alluding to her humble

status) starts to change once her husband goes to Kolkata to complete another educational degree. The same Mrinmoyee, who refused to accompany Apurbo to Kolkata because of her friend Rakhai, warms up to Apurbo when he returns. I think that Mrinmoyee, though she submits herself to patriarchal norms at the end of the story, dares to choose her husband according to her wishes and her time. This freedom of choice was unheard of in Tagore's times.

Third on my list is Giribala of "Maanbhanjan" ("The Appeasement of Fury"), a short-story which Tagore published in 1895. In Tagore's story, she is shown as a lonely housewife whose husband (Gopinath Seal of a house of landlords) beats her up, takes her jewellery and elopes with his lover, the theatre-actress Labango. While spying on her husband, Giribala herself falls in love with theatre and theatricalities. After Gopinath's betrayal, Giribala does not lament about her fate. She, rather, re-incarnates herself as Mandira Devi, an actress of a successful play. Labango returns with Gopinath to learn about the actress who has replaced her, and both are left stunned. While Gopinath is enraged as he still feels he holds authority over her as she is still his wife or 'property', Labango is resentful of having left her flourishing career for a man. Giribala shows that women need not depend on the men in their lives and that they can achieve their own success. Bhaskar Chattopadhyay writes,

"Tagore's story is a timeless tale of a woman's emancipation, a bold ode to the notion of womanhood and a beautiful story of how fate and destiny turn the wheels of fortune for all of us. At the same time, it also explores the frailty of relationships and talks about the dangers of vanity"⁴.

Charulata of *Nastanirh*, a novella published in 1901, is fourth on my list of strong Tagorean female characters. Charulata is a lonely housewife – neglected by her liberal-minded but self-centred husband Bhupati – who falls in love with his brother-in-law, Amal. She initially finds it difficult to stay idle at home and expresses interest in learning music. In fact, Charulata does not have an affair consciously, but is innocently drawn to the attention she receives from her teacher, brother-in-law, and friend. Through Charulata and her divided affections and mental turmoils, Rabindranath Tagore explores the concept of women making choices and giving vent to their desires. Tagore courageously shows how Bhupati's busy schedule is the root cause of Charulata's loneliness and in her brother-in-law Amal, she finds creativity and the desire to dream.

Binodini of *Chokher Bali*, a novel Tagore published in 1903,

comes fifth on my list. A widow herself, Binodini rejects the patriarchal norms applied to the Bengali widows as she involves herself in an extramarital affair with Mahendra, nurses conflicting feelings towards Mahendra's friend and adopted-brother Behari, and shares a problematic relationship with Ashalata, Mahendra's wife. Binodini does not accept her fate with resignation, and does not give up her sexual desires. Rather, she uses her smartness, beauty, and education to make her own presence felt in her society. Though she retires to a women's shelter at the conclusion of the story, she has striven a lot in order to uplift the condition of the widows, which exceptionalises her as a Tagorean female character.

Mrinal of *Streer Patra* ('The Wife's Letter'), published in 1914, is the sixth on my list. In the story, Mrinal, married for fifteen years, is shown to be a progressive woman who dares to leave the house of her regressive husband and in-laws. The story is told in epistolary form where the 'rebellious' wife writes a letter to her husband regarding her subordination. Unlike Mrinal's elder sister-in-law who unquestionably accepts the patriarchal system, and the poor orphaned Bindu who is forced to commit suicide, Mrinal's education does not allow her to do the same. Starting with a common humble addressing note 'Sricharankamaleshu' ('at your lotus-like feet') she ends up addressing herself as 'Charanatalashraychhinna' ('separated from your lotus-like feet') – a sarcastically used word, which actually signifies a rejection for all those so called relationships she left behind. In between, she opens up her box of feminist realisations vexed by some incidents fall out inside her very own household. Standing on the shore of the Bay of Bengal, she finally declares that she would never allow herself to be confined and codified by the patriarchal societal norms. Rather, she wishes to begin a life of freedom and self-respect for which she never realised an urge before.

Kalyani of *Aparichita* ('The Woman Unknown') (1916) is the seventh strong Tagorean female character on my list. Kalyani's father, Shambhunath Babu, who is rich and has educated his daughter, fixes her marriage to Anupam, a postgraduate, but who would marry his bride for a hefty dowry. When Anupam's maternal-uncle humiliates Shambhunath Babu on the marriage-day over the suspected 'purity' of the gold-ornaments, the enraged and self-respecting bride's father breaks off his daughter's marriage. To a gluttonous patriarchal society which always hankers after dowry from the bride's parents, Kalyani is an 'unfamiliar' woman who chooses celibacy/spinsterhood over humiliation. She also registers her resentment against the British imperialism. This exceptionalises Kalyani's character to my interpretation.

On my list – chronologically arranged – are also the three female protagonists of Tagore’s dance-dramas: Chitrangada, Chandalika, and Shyama. Going against the usual patriarchal norms, Chitrangada, in the 1936-nritya-natya of the same name, dares to choose Arjuna, and expresses her sexual desire quite openly while trying to impress him. She is also a woman with uncommon military prowess, and thus is perhaps one of the stronger female characters Tagore ever produced. Refusing to be cowed down by male and so-called ‘upper-caste’-parochialism, Chandalika rebels against the deplorable practice of untouchability, and later uses her mother’s magical prowess to hold the Buddhist monk, Ananda, back in order to receive continuous support for her struggles against a casteist, patriarchal society. Shyama, the beautiful and efficient courtesan in Tagore’s 1939-nritya-natya is another strong female character who chooses the foreign-merchant Bajrasen as her lover, and easily sacrifices Uttiya to win her love-life with Bajrasen. Though Bajrasen deserts her rather arbitrarily at the end of the dance-drama, she does not, for once, is shown to regret her decision regarding Bajrasen.

It should be admitted here that as many works have been written disclaiming Rabindranath Tagore as a feminist as have been published in favour of his ‘feministic bent of mind’. I am sure that some papers questioning Tagore’s concept of gender, would be read here. However, what I have tried to do here is to simply re-read some of the female characters from Tagore’s literary world to explore how they have made their femininity felt across the society. Tagore might not be a feminist to many critics; but his female-characters definitely are.

Notes:

1. Roy, Tapas. “The Marriage-story of the Kaviguru”. *Risingbd* 20 September 2015. Accessed on 29 February 2020 <<https://risingbd.com/art-literature-news/124244>>
2. “Tagore no feminist; his Women are”. *The Telegraph (Kolkata)* 20 March 2014. Accessed on 29 February 2020 <<https://www.telegraphindia.com/states/west-bengal/tagore-no-feminist-his-women-are/cid/1289203>>
3. Quayum, Mohammad. “Humour in Rabindranath Tagore’s Selected Early Short Stories: A Freudian Rereading”. *Researchgate* 1 November 2014. Accessed on 29 February 2020 <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/282135973_Humour_in_Rabindranath_Tagore's_Selected_Early_Short_Stories_A_Freudian_Rereading>
4. Chattopadhyay, Bhaskar. “Manbhanjan-Review: Abhijit Chowdhury’s

Miniseries does full justice to Rabindranath Tagore's Short-story". Firstpost 21 June 2019. Accessed on 29 February 2020 <<https://www.firstpost.com/entertainment/manbhanjan-review-abhijit-chowdhurys-miniseries-does-full-justice-to-rabindranath-tagores-short-story-6850021.html>>

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